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Women's Concerns

Report



Women and Islam

The Islamic world is far from homogeneous. It stretches from Southeast Asia to western Africa. The way in which Islam is practiced varies from country to country, from area to area within a country, and from individual to individual. The rights and freedoms of women also vary within the Islamic world. Within this issue of Report are several stories that point out this variety.

This issue also contains accounts of how western women try to live, in a meaningful way, in an Islamic setting. This is not necessarily easy, but for many it is rewarding.

Many of us know Western women who live in an Islamic setting, and many of us know Muslim women as neighbors and friends. Listening to these women's experiences has made me take a second look at my own views about Islam and women.

When I was preparing this issue, I had a conversation with a friend, originally from Iran, who had lived in Winnipeg for three years. We have discussed many things in the course of our friendship and sometimes we talk about women and their roles. "Would you," I asked her, "ever go back to live in Iran?" "No, I could never be veiled," was her immediate response.

Her mother and sisters go veiled at all times, and she is sure she could not survive in such a setting. But the conversation did not end there. She was adamant that, apart from their veils, women have as much opportunity in Iran as they do in Canada. Many professions are open to them, they have educational opportunities, and they have taken advantage of these opportunities.

I wanted to challenge my friend. Everything I know about Iran tells me that is not true. Did the

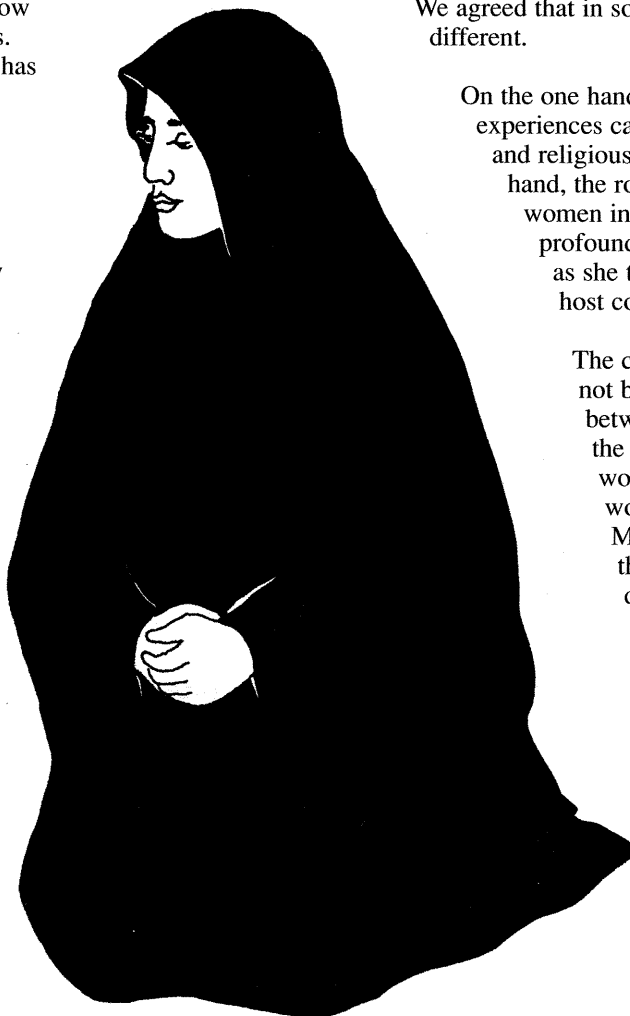
Revolution in Iran not mean a giant step backwards for women's rights? But then I stopped myself. What do I really know about Iran? A book or two, a movie, news reports, television—all from a distance and always through someone else's eyes. Who is a better authority on Iran, I or my friend?

I had another conversation some months later with a Bengali woman living in Winnipeg. I asked her in what ways Canadian and Bengali women were different. Canadian women are more independent, she said. I then asked her in what ways they were the same. "Oh," she replied, "We both love our children, we both cook and," she said with a twinkle in her eye, "we both love to shop." We agreed that in some ways, we are not that different.

On the one hand, our humanity and common experiences can unite us in spite of cultural and religious differences. On the other hand, the roles and expectations of women in an Islamic context can profoundly affect a Western woman as she tries to find her place in a host country.

The contributions in this issue do not belittle the differences between Western cultures and the cultures of the Islamic world, nor the challenges that a woman faces as she lives in a Muslim setting. But neither do they focus only on the differences. They challenge us to take another look at our assumptions about Islam and women.

Kerry Fast, compiler, lives in Winnipeg, Man., and works in the Middle East Department of MCC. She is also studying at the University of Manitoba in a pre-masters program in religion.



by Alfrieda Fast

Four Muslim women

What is it like to live in a Muslim society? What is it like to be a Muslim woman in a Muslim world and what it is like for a Western woman? I have lived in a Muslim country and have spoken to friends about the guiding laws in the Qu'ran about women. Answers have varied considerably. Many women do not read the Book and judge what it says by how others interpret it. Some read faithfully and have told me that there is no reference to *pardah* in the Book, but that *pardah* is only a tradition that has taken the form of religion.

Others have quoted to me the restrictions that are outlined regarding the dress of women and their behavior in society. (*Pardah* is the word for all methods that keep women protected from public eye—the veil that covers women, as well as curtained off places in restaurants for women and families.)

Various Islamic groups will adhere to different disciplines. Fundamentalist groups have been instrumental in causing widespread opposition to females in politics. I have found it increasingly difficult to separate culture from religion. Much of what I perceive to be culture is adhered to religiously, making this Muslim society intolerant of anything outside.

Having spent 10 years in a Muslim country, I have learned to know women in various walks of life. Each of these women experience their own society in a unique way and have enriched my life. During this time I have adapted a lifestyle that reflects my personality and goals. Other Western women may have developed a different response. In these stories the reader will learn about women's roles in this culture and how they find meaning and purpose in spite of certain obstacles.

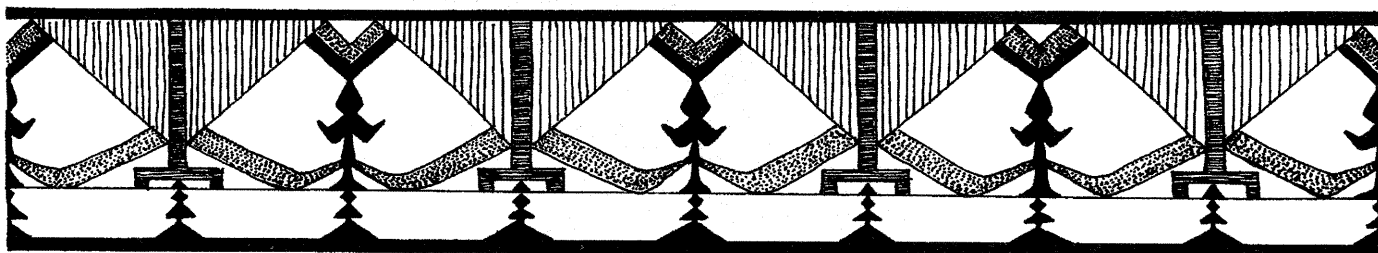
In our neighborhood is a small grocery store. The owner is a 55-year-old woman. That in itself is significant, because I have not heard of other women in our region owning or operating a store. The store is known as "Auntie's Store" and is one of a small group of shops. Clustered together are four other grocery stores, a fast food shop, two tailors, and a public video game room. I enjoy going to Auntie's Store, and so do many local women and children.

For me, this is the place to meet other women. A short wooden bench in her already overcrowded shop invites one to sit and visit for a while. She is friendly to everyone and speaks kindly even to the most demanding young boys and beggar children. Here one can hear bits of gossip and news. On one occasion I heard a customer pouring out her grievances into Auntie's sympathetic ear.

Auntie shows more independence than most women. Yet she is aware of her dependence on men and so exerts her freedom within cultural boundaries. Significantly, she has no male helper in her store and more than once I have seen her standing in front of a neighboring shop talking to the men. One evening our family was out for a walk at closing time. Her husband was outside with her, helping her pull down the tin shutters, putting a lock at each end. He got onto a motorcycle, she jumped on behind him, turned to wave at us and they were off.

Auntie needed more in her life than homemaking. Her children are grown and don't need her any more, and her age gives her the credibility to do something on her own. Her store is a bright spot in our neighborhood and she appears successful and fulfilled because of it.

Another friend of mine, Roshni (all names have been changed), is a capable manager of a woman's bank. She and her two children used to live with her parents-in-law. Although I only briefly met her husband, I was always encouraged by the relationship as I viewed it through Roshni's talking and her attitude toward him. More than respect and obedience, she held him as a friend. He worked



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in a distant city, coming home only on weekends. In this Muslim society it is essential that a woman belongs to a man. Because Roshni had a husband and "belonged," she was able to carry on in the business world, even in his absence.

A woman, either alone or with children, cannot live in a house by herself. If her mother had come to live with her as she had hoped, she could have rented the upstairs apartment of a house that was already occupied by a family. Unfortunately this did not work out, so she was forced to live with her parents-in-law. Still, two things were in her favor. She had a supportive husband and a family she belonged to. When her husband was tragically killed a year ago, she was devastated. Both of these supports were suddenly knocked out from under her.

When I visited Roshni shortly after her husband's death, she said, "What will I do? I'm a widow. I'm nobody. I have no credibility. The business world is a man's world. One wrong move socially and I have to leave. I can't even consider continuing to work at the bank." She never did return to her job. She now has a job in another city and is living with her mother.

Roshni is a noble woman. She is enterprising and hard working. She has displayed a vision for oppressed women and set out to help them obtain low interest loans to begin small home businesses. She has come to me for ideas on what would be appropriate ways to generate income. Managing the bank has been her way of helping her own people. Undaunted, she has continued.

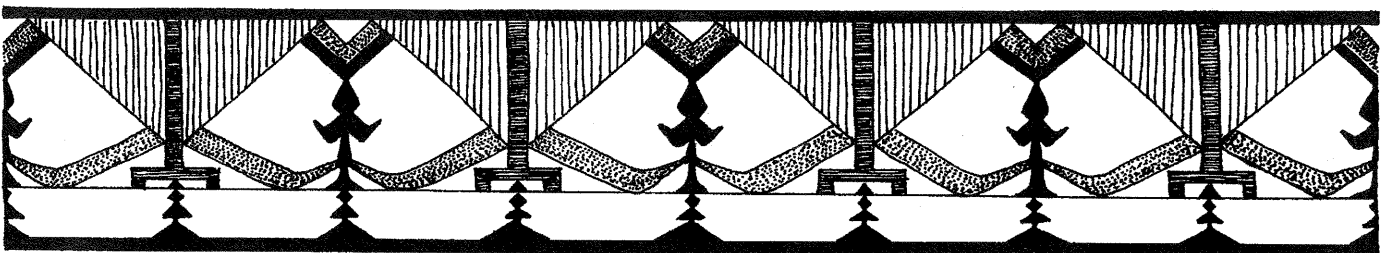
Siama is a close friend of mine. She's gone through one divorce and a separation. Her own family has disowned her because of the social disgrace she has brought upon them. She now lives on her own with an older woman who takes care of her and her four children.

Life is very demanding for Siama. Being solely responsible for her family's livelihood, she holds down four jobs. She cannot manage to do all the shopping and errands herself. Because girls are not allowed unaccompanied outside of their home, her 6-year-old son and the older housekeeper do most of the shopping, rather than her teenage daughters.

I've been with Siama over the years and seen her through many difficult situations. Sometimes I've listened to sagas of family disputes and jealousies. I've celebrated birthdays with her and sat beside her when her 2-year-old was hospitalized for brain surgery. I've been her scribe as she lay on her back in traction following a car accident. I've been her refuge when she was evicted from her father's house. I've eaten her delicious curries and sweet dishes and cooked a traditional western Christmas dinner for her and some of her extended family. We've watched the Jesus film together and discussed my faith heritage.

Siama has provided friendship for me. In spite of the fact that she has become a disgrace in her society she has displayed many noble characteristics. She works eagerly, whether it is in preparing to teach the following days' geography lesson or designing a new garment. She rises early and provides food for her family and cares lovingly for her servants. She has opened her arms to the poor and taken in a needy child, providing a healthy environment and an opportunity for education. She is not idle and watches carefully over the affairs of her household. She looks to tomorrow and its opportunities courageously.

Ashie is an uneducated woman who used to work for me. She has seven children. Her husband works as a government servant for a meager salary. They live in a tiny two-room house. To come to our house, she has a 15-minute walk to a main road where she catches public transportation. She told me one day that the trip to work usually put her into a sullen mood, because young men would follow her, taunting her because she was female. If there were no other female passengers, she would have to pay double fare; no men wanted to sit beside a woman.





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In this culture, women do not go out by themselves unless they absolutely have to. They can be the subject of lewd remarks, pinching and touching, of staring and of being followed. Women will go out accompanied by children or, if travelling long distances, will look for the company of a man—either a husband, brother, cousin or uncle. Ashie has been brave and determined, spurned on by the pressure of having to earn a second income.

During the years, I have inwardly reacted negatively to Ashie's dependence on me. Because she is a believer, a Christian, she assumed a lot in our relationship. She assumed that I would act like her parent and bail her out of financial difficulties. She said we were sisters. It all came to a head one day when she had been at our house frequently for a number of weeks. I met her at the door and immediately noticed that she was carrying food. I knew that she had come to stay. I could hardly invite her in with enthusiasm, but I invited her in.

I excused myself to be alone for a few minutes, for a prayer of patience and for love. A new determination came over me and I participated in a delicious meal prepared by the hands of a woman who was destitute, poor and needy and who had craved friendship and love from someone who could give her what she needed. I resolved to view her as one deserving love and friendship, as God had created her.

One of the pillars of Islam is keeping the fast during the month of *Ramazan*. During this month Muslims do not eat or drink during the daylight hours. Early before dawn, they get up to prepare and eat a hearty breakfast. Just before the first stroke of dawn a siren goes off announcing the beginning of the fast. After this, until evening, the main focus in each household is the preparations for the breaking

of the fast and the subsequent evening meal. Many hours are spent preparing food. In addition, preparations begin early for the three days of festivities that end the month of fasting. All of society is geared toward the celebration of *Ramazan*.

For years it has always been a difficult month for me. I would forget it was fasting month and embarrassingly offer tea to guests who would drop by during the day. I would get impatient with shopkeepers who rested exhausted behind counters, or with drivers on the road who drove recklessly because of fatigue or lack of food. Avoidance seemed to be the best way to tolerate the public. I felt alienated from my neighborhood friends because afternoons were no longer suitable times for visits, and mornings were taken up with vigorous food preparations. Evenings were spent eating with close friends and relatives.

After considering this, I decided to participate in the fast. My lifestyle changed. In the mornings I, too, was busy preparing food for the evening. My friend next door was eager to help me prepare a special curry. More than that, she brought over delicacies. As we cooked a pot of spicy rice together, I learned about the fine rules of the fast. My friend had a new interest in me. We talked about the physical and the spiritual value of fasting. Besides receiving gifts of food, my family was invited to the celebration of feasting and visiting at the end of the month. Because I was also fasting, I didn't forget and offer tea to an unexpected guest. I also did not have abundant energy during the afternoons and wasn't interested in shopping. Rather than feeling alienated from my neighbors, I felt a bond between us. I also felt the physical strain of the fast, and shared in the anticipation of the celebrations that would conclude it.

Finding a place cross culturally has many aspects. Roles and responses vary, as do obstacles. By learning to know these women and focusing on individuals rather than groups, I have found people with strength and dignity. It has been a privilege to live and work in this country. I have attempted to experience life like they do and have been enriched because of these friendships. These relationships have been fulfilling and have made it possible for me to discuss my faith with them.

Alfrieda Fast, together with her family, has lived in a Muslim country in Asia for 10 years. Her time is spent being a mother, wife and neighbor in a small city setting. Alfrieda is originally from Manitoba.

"Even more difficult than explaining my own singleness in this context was seeing firsthand the immense pain here of being barren, or being a mother, but not the mother of a son. I came to a new understanding of the biblical stories of Hannah and Elizabeth."

by Jenny Coward

Working in Nazareth

I lived and worked for four years in Nazareth, Israel. Often people assume from that location that I was in an Israeli Jewish context. I was not. Nazareth is the largest Arab city within the present Israeli borders. The population of Lower Nazareth/Nazareth Down (as opposed to the newer Jewish settlement ringing the hills above) is over 50,000. The language, the culture, the administration and the foods are Arab in flavor and nature.

Nazareth Elit/Upper Nazareth started to form in the 1950s and has remained primarily a Jewish town. Overall the administration, the flavor, the culture of Upper Nazareth is Jewish—some being native-born *sabras* (Israelis) and many, during the time I was there, coming in the latest wave of Russian immigration.

My work was in the administrative office of the Nazareth Hospital, a mission compound in Nazareth Down. This position was independent of any Mennonite organization. Founded by the Edinburgh Medical Mission in 1861 and led in the founding days by Dr. P.K. Vartan, an Armenian physician, the hospital has served mainly the Arab population of Palestine and then Israel for almost 134 years. Nazareth and the surrounding Arab villages have been the focus of service. In the tragic aftermath of the 1948 war and the establishment of the state of Israel, Palestinian Christians and Muslims who refused to leave their homes and land became a somewhat embattled minority within a Jewish state. Both Muslims and Christians have struggled to maintain their heritage, their religious beliefs and their family connectedness in a Jewish/Zionist political and cultural arena.

By the time of my work in Nazareth, the town had become majority Muslim and the hospital reflected the population dynamic. Most of our staff and patients were from Muslim background, with the remaining portion being primarily Arab Christian. Expatriates from Europe, North America and Australia contributed to the work of the hospital by physical presence and finances. There were also several Jewish physicians and other personnel who chose to work in an Arab hospital. Some Jewish patients came to us, especially utilizing our maternity services.

It was not Utopia, but there were times when seeing an Arab Muslim nurse gave me hope for a future. I did not fool myself that the complexities of the region could ever be boiled down to a "feel good, let's all work together hospital model." But if the needs of the dying in palliative care could be met by Muslim, Christian and Jew, and the joy of birth could be shared by Muslim, Christian and Jew....then you do have the raw materials for real hope being translated into hopeful reality.

When asked to share some of my feelings about being a woman in the setting described above, the temptation is to try to write concerning large issues that grow out of living in an Islamic context. And there are issues to be dealt with, especially for women. For me, some of the greatest enlightenment came from how I learned to view an Islamic context. I came to believe that many abuses and restrictions are more in keeping with tradition and culture than are actually the result of the thinking of the Prophet. I just as strongly believe that in our own Western society, and in the church, there are abuses and restrictions and cultural/traditional remnants concerning women that do not truly reflect the love, acceptance and words of the Christ.

Yes, there were some negatives for me personally and, more importantly, for women who have grown up within the Islamic context. But there were positives as well, and opportunities to see the many sides of the negatives. There were adjustments for me in dress, although certainly not the more strict requirements of working in Bangladesh, for example. I had to develop new ways to relate to males—both married and single males. There were some patronizing attitudes. Being single in a society where a girl is not a woman until marriage and children is difficult.

Even more difficult than explaining my own singleness in this context was seeing firsthand the immense pain here of being barren, or being a mother, but not the mother of a son. I came to a new understanding of the biblical stories of Hannah and Elizabeth. While part of me cried out that the value of any woman is not in relation to her husband or her children or her lack of children, the everyday reality was that it mattered a great deal. In an Islamic context perhaps this is more obvious. I do not fool myself that in our own Western society it is not an issue.

Was I patronized? Yes, of course. There were times when I sat quietly and did not voice an opinion because it would have been equal to the wall suddenly speaking. There were times when my ideas were shared and ignored and then came back around out of a male mouth and were accepted.

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However, I have been working since the age of 17 and I have lost track of the times this same process has happened to me in the U.S. work arena. For me as a woman, and a woman who prides herself on the craft and skills of being a secretary, I have learned that often I am not heard or acknowledged because of my position, or as some view it, my lack of position. Being patronized was not new or an invention of an Islamic society.

I became aware of how very important it is to belong to a family unit. A single woman alone is not really understood. In the West, we pride ourselves on our individuality, our ability to stand on our own two feet. I believe for me that is necessary in our society. I know to whom I belong. But I had to rethink constantly my stance as people asked me why my family let me come alone to this place.

Our scattered family ties and the breakdown of the extended family in North America are hard to explain. I came to feel that the hospital was my father. When asked where I was from, I would say "Mustashfa Inglisi" (the English Hospital). That work community became my tribe, my identification point. My co-worker and her family and her husband's family also included me and gave me a frame of reference. That was important. My Scottish ancestors would understand the need to belong to a clan—to be more than one family unit or one individual. I came to a deeper understanding of why people will stand together around a name or village—why that name or village can be more binding than issues of right or wrong.

So what did I gain from this exposure? I came back with the sure knowledge that there is no Islamic monolith out there. Living in Nazareth and traveling in the region showed me diversity and variety and many cultural patterns intertwined with Islam. Egyptian Islamic context is different from Jordanian Islamic context and different from Nazareth Islamic context. There are varieties within countries as well as among countries.

I came away with memories of strong women—some formally educated and some possessing practical common sense and knowledge and wisdom. These were women who do not sit silently or in the shadow—women who have feelings and thoughts and opinions and who know who they are and where they are going.

I came away with the memory of feeling more safe traveling alone in an Islamic country than I ever would in Miami, Fla. I do not wish to incur the wrath of the Miami Chamber of Commerce, but this has been my experience.

I came away with a deeper humility when I realized how tolerant people were of my national origin, my personality, my awkward attempts with their language, my cultural blunders and misconceptions.

I came away with the sound of the regular prayer calls still in my ears, reminding me of my need to be diligent in my own prayer life.

I came away with memories of a Muslim doctor on our staff who apologized to me for a wrong and shamed me, a Christian, with his attitude of forgiveness.

In an Islamic context, I like to think I came to a deeper understanding of my own worth, to a more alive relationship with my Christ, and I pray, to a more tolerant and loving view of those who also call upon the name of God/Allah.

Jenny Coward spent four years living in Nazareth, Israel. Presently she is an administrative assistant in the Central and South Asia Department of MCC in Akron, Pa.

"From you I learned about a quality of friendship that reaches across barriers of race, color, language, background, age, religion and culture."

by Joy Carter

A letter to Diina

My dear Diina,

Accept from me, my sister, many sweet and heartfelt greetings. How are you, your husband and children? I hope from God you are all well and healthy. I am glad to tell you my mother and I are both well, thanks to God.

It is many years, my sister Diina [all names have been changed], since you have heard from me, but I hope you have not forgotten me because I have never forgotten you and the time we spent together all those years ago. You were not only my student and friend, but you became like a sister to me. Do you remember that time with fondness as I do?

As I look back over the years, I realize that although I went to you as your "teacher," it was you who taught me so much. I learned about the quality of friendship, about patience, determination with quiet acceptance, and that in everything there is hope.

Do you remember how we first met? I had just returned from my first home leave when your uncle Yusuf, who was a teacher in our Mission School, came to me. "Would you be willing to teach English to my niece, Diina?" he asked. "She can't come to your classes because her father doesn't allow her to go outside the compound. But she wants to learn." "Get permission from her father for me to teach her English and Bible, and I'll do it," I answered. Four years later, you could read stories in English, write me letters in English, do simple arithmetic, and you had become a follower of Jesus the Messiah.

I remember how excited I was about that! We progressed slowly verse by verse through John's Gospel, week after week. By the time I got to chapter 11, I realized a change had taken place in your attitude. I felt the time was right to ask you if you were ready to commit your life to Jesus, whose life, teachings, death and resurrection showed he was greater than just a prophet. When I asked you, how exciting and humbling it was to hear you quietly say, "I've already done that two weeks ago."



I wonder if I ever thought about what making that choice would mean to you, a young woman in her late teens, born into a Muslim home, kept in seclusion, rarely allowed out, and sometimes beaten by a hot-tempered father. Over the months that followed as our weekly English lessons continued, we began to spend more time talking over issues that mattered to you, and learning to bring them before God in prayer. When you began to pray in your own language, it was as if you were no longer enclosed within those four walls. You were free. And that freedom gave you hope.

Not long after that came your engagement. It was the result of an arrangement between your father and one of his relatives. The young man was a cousin of sorts and known to you from childhood. He had attended our Mission School. I wonder what you were thinking about that day as you were bundled out of the house so that it could be prepared for the guests that afternoon. As the men in one room witnessed the Muslim Sheikh legalizing the agreement between the two families, the women outside danced, sang, clapped and stamped their approval of your engagement to Rashiid.

And how did I feel about it? This was the first time I had been really close to someone who had no say about their choice of marriage partner, and as a single Christian woman, observing the joyful activities going on around me, I

remember feeling sad for you, Diina. You had no chance to say “Yes,” “No” or “Wait.” And if you were asked whether you would “accept this young man,” like a good obedient daughter you were expected to say, “Yes.” How easily we take some things for granted.

The differences between us were more marked at this time than at any other time I remember, despite all that we had shared over the years. I especially found it hard to accept that you were not even present while that agreement was being made; in fact you had been taken to another house and were not even told why. Perhaps you guessed. This was a common practice in our town and sometimes young women were not told what had happened and the name of their husband-to-be until several weeks later.

We had discussed marriage before, especially the implications for you, now a follower of the Messiah. I knew it was a difficult situation for the young men believers, impossible for the young women. But happily Rashiid himself had been open to Bible teaching through the mission school, and proved to be a very supportive husband. So the fervent prayers you and I had offered on his behalf before your marriage did not go unanswered.

When the time for your wedding came I was working in another town, but I was delighted when you asked me to be one of your bridesmaids. One of the duties I remember was being present when you took a bath, before being perfumed and clothed in your white bridal dress. Then while dancing, clapping, yodelling and noisy wedding festivities were going on around you, you sat quiet and serious behind a curtain in a stuffy room, in the traditional way, the black shaadar covering your bridal gown. I wonder what you were thinking at that time?

Writing this letter to you after all these years has given *me* much to think about. Those eight years I spent in your country were wonderful, full of many happy memories of friends, shared events and activities, and never-to-be-

forgotten experiences. I learned so much about myself. Teacher, Christian, missionary, Bible teacher, leader, counselor—in all of these capacities I learned and grew, but the greatest lessons I learned were from you, Diina, and my other friends and students. You were my greatest teachers.

From you I learned about a quality of friendship that reaches across barriers of race, color, language, background, age, religion and culture, to accept me as I was, a single, white missionary woman from a faraway country, struggling to learn your language and understand your culture. I learned patience from you, too, as I watched your acceptance of the secluded life you led behind the wall, and I admired your determination to make the best of it. How I looked forward to those weekly lessons with you.

Most of all, I learned about hope. Because no matter how difficult the situation that faced you, you trusted God, prayed and believed in a satisfying outcome. Hope is what keeps us going in hard times.

I have a hope, too, that one day we may meet again, Diina, and take up where we left off. I am sure we will have much to laugh and cry about. Until then, God bless you, my dear friend. Greet your husband and children from me.

Your sister,

Ifrah

Joy Carter works as a bilingual advisor and interpreter with the New Zealand Refugee and Migrant Service and in writing radio scripts. She has worked in numerous countries in East Africa as well as in Oman. Her involvements have been primarily in the field of education—teaching English, education counselor for refugees, and preparing educational materials. She has worked for UNHCR, Sudan Interior Mission and World Vision.

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by Suzanne Nickel

When women aren't equals

It's 4:15 a.m. and the call to prayer rings out through the streets to awaken the Muslims. Men start to trickle out into the street and head for the mosques. I'm having trouble sleeping tonight and find myself staring out the dark window, reflecting on life here. At first when we came, the call to prayer sounded so eerie as the chanting voice rang out; now in the still of the night I find it quite soothing, something that has become familiar.

Yes, adjusting culturally to Egypt has been a challenge, and I now wonder if it has been a positive or negative adjustment. I have had positive experiences and have developed some nice friendships, learned about the polite and giving side of the Egyptian people. But what is keeping me awake tonight is this feeling that I have become a hard, or cold person. The outward friendly nature of mine has restricted itself so that now I feel like an inward person. When walking in the street, I have developed the habit of putting up a wall and ignoring what is happening around me.

Is it because I adjusted badly to the culture, or is it the Muslim culture itself that causes me to do this? Would I act like this if I were in a South American or Asian culture? I attract constant attention because I am a foreigner. I stick out in a crowd here, and I do not like this kind of attention. But I feel my cold attitude in the street stems from more than this.

I think I have become this way partly because I see, feel and hear the attitude that women are lower than men, and I'll do anything to show my disapproval of this attitude. On the street I act indignant to men as my way of showing, "I am equal to you, so watch your step." Many times I have been angry over comparisons between Randal and myself. Of course, in everyone's eyes (men and women) Randal comes first, and people would rather talk to him and consider what he says as superior to my statements. I have grown resentful of the different treatment. To me Randal also comes first, but that is because I love him, not because he is a man. Randal and I still relate as we did in North America and he is fairly

empathetic, though unable to understand completely the subtleties in the way we are treated differently.

It is so frustrating when women think I am overpowering my husband, when really I'm just exerting my equalness. I'd think women would be sympathetic to the need for being equal with men. However, the deeply cultural understanding is that men are superior and women are here to serve men. My trying to show another way is misinterpreted.

Here there are definite gender roles, strictly enforced through societal pressure. Traditional roles are followed, and even if a woman has an outside job, this does not mean her load at home is lessened. Most husbands are unwilling to help. We have seen numerous examples of women taking the role of a household servant. One example stands out in our minds. We went to an Egyptian family's house for supper. We felt very uncomfortable because the woman never sat down to eat. She cleaned the fish for us and was constantly refilling everyone's plates. This continued throughout the evening. Any offers by us to help were refused, usually by the husband.

Another issue that makes me feel the repression of women is seeing the women here wearing the head veil (Hagab), and a minority also wear the veil to cover their face and eyes. The main reason for the veil is to hide the woman's beauty from men. Her beauty is only for her husband, and she should not tempt others. This is the point that I find frustrating and am not able to understand. If a woman is dressed with modesty, she shouldn't have to be dehumanized into hiding behind a black face covering and veil. It should be the man's problem to control his behavior and desires and not force his weakness onto women. Where is your identity if you have to hide the way you look? (Plus it's too hot to be covered in polyester black.)

The different pressures here have had an impact on Randal and my relationship. Usually I am not as interested in leaving the apartment by myself. We have moved more towards the traditional male and female roles partly as a result of our job descriptions and partly as a result of the cultural expectations. It doesn't necessarily bother me to take on a traditional role, and I do find a satisfaction in this role, except that it feels it has been forced on us in some ways. Randal tries to change these roles by serving guests when they come to our



"We have moved more towards the traditional male and female roles partly as a result of our job descriptions and partly as a result of the cultural expectations. It doesn't necessarily bother me to take on a traditional role, and I do find a satisfaction in this role, except that it feels it has been forced on us in some ways."

house, but that often makes men and women very uncomfortable.

From our experience, a Western woman's self-concept and confidence is really challenged in this culture. We both feel equals as humans, we are both able to help and teach people, etc., but we are treated so differently. This attitude prevails from both Egyptian women and men, and sometimes children. I have struggled with my self-esteem. I don't feel as confident in my own decisions and opinions as I used to.

My frustrations lie in the strict gender role expectations and the inflexibility of these roles. Maybe it is easier to live knowing what is exactly expected of you. Knowing the unwritten rules, such as a woman should never go out after dark and should never live alone but must live with a family or a husband, might create a sense of security.

I have developed a deep respect for Egyptian women and the strength they show in their roles. There are many women who are trying to change the system and have overcome the barriers in this society. Our neighbor, who is afflicted severely with polio, has made many impressive achievements in difficult circumstances. She is a doctor with a successful practice. She lives by herself and is self-reliant. I do note that as women get older they get more respect.

From my Western perspective, I find it difficult to understand why more women don't speak out. I hope that as I continue living in Egypt, I may see progress in this area as well as in my own understanding and acceptance of others and myself.

Suzanne Nickel wrote this in the middle of a three-year MCC term in Egypt. She is involved in education and health in Port Fouad. She is originally from Calgary, Alta.


by Bertha Beachy

My Somali sojourn

The past month brought many reminders of my Somali connections: A former Peace Corp friend called to say Goosh had died in London; to all of us Goosh was known as the foremost Somali language linguist. Then a Somali couple working in Nairobi sent their form letter to me to be mailed. A former missionary colleague sent his two-month African itinerary. And national and local newspapers carried articles about coming Somali crises and the death of the revolutionary leader in exile in Nigeria.

I weep for this fragile land and people. I am angry that the cold war made all those guns possible. This land and its people are more vulnerable because they were near the Saudi oil fields. I reach for my hand-carved wooden Somali prayer bead necklace and pray.

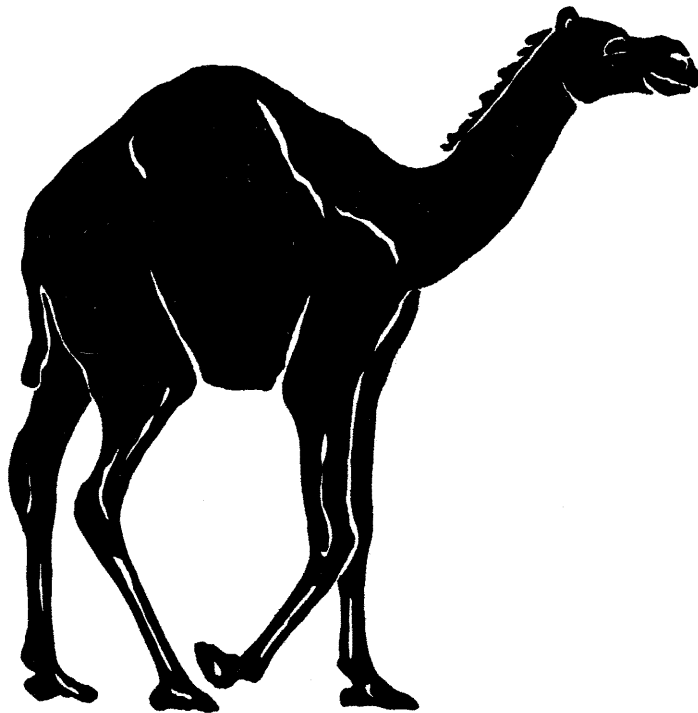
It is more than 36 years since I landed in Somalia for the first time. For the next 20 years all my energies were engaged with Somalis. And since moving to Indiana, I continue to have Somali friends here.

My Islamic encounter with Somalis has forever changed me! Several important aspects were: my sense of calling, my Amish background, the Somali faith and personality, that particular era of colonialism, revolution and mission, my singleness and my own spiritual journey.

At 19, I felt called to mission at an Amish mission conference. Later I changed my church membership. During college, Africa and later Somalia came into focus. Six of us from the class of 1958 set sail for Africa in September.

It was my first serious encounter with Islam. Because I could not have a language tutor, I went to the village daily. I drank quarts of delicious tea but, more importantly, I bonded with Somali people. I felt at home with their extended family, community and oral traditions. My background challenged me to live a life that could be trusted, rather than needing to speak about my faith. Somalis taught me how to ask honest questions and to become more politically aware.

Life revolved around Islamic practices, the clan and the nomadic lifestyle. The best survived this sometimes harsh semi-desert life. Time with the prized camels gave birth to



"Somali women have always been part of the nomadic life. They build the houses, do household weaving from the dun grass, and care for the children and goats."

great poems and proverbs that were part of Somali conversation. Somalis loved words. They were fiercely independent and pragmatic with a direct way of speaking.

Eastern Mennonite Mission (EMM) was situated in the Italian colonial part of Somalia. Independence and elections came in 1960. In 1969 there was a socialistic revolution. By 1972 Somalia chose to write the Somali language with the Roman alphabet. Somali is the mother tongue, Arabic the religious language and all early education was in a foreign language.

Thus it was that EMM became involved in schools. I began an elementary day school and later an English bookstore in Mogadishu, the capital city. I taught adult classes both to men and women. After the Somali language was written, all private schools were nationalized. The government assigned EMM teachers to various schools and I taught English at three different secondary schools. Later I was transferred to the College of Education. There were more than 40 on the faculty from Pakistan, East Germany, Egypt and Somalia. I was the only woman, Christian, American on campus and I loved it!

Some time later a Somali woman joined the staff. This points to a typical situation in most Islamic societies. Boys go to school before girls do. The revolution urged girls to go to school in uniform versus dresses. Many older women learned to read Somali in literacy classes. It was an exciting time for women.

Somali women have always been part of the nomadic life. They build the houses, do household weaving from the dun grass, and care for the children and goats. Heads are

normally covered but not totally veiled. They compose poetry and songs for women, but seldom the epic poem of the men. They teach the Qu'ran at home and pray there as well. They are some of the most beautiful women in the world by any standards.

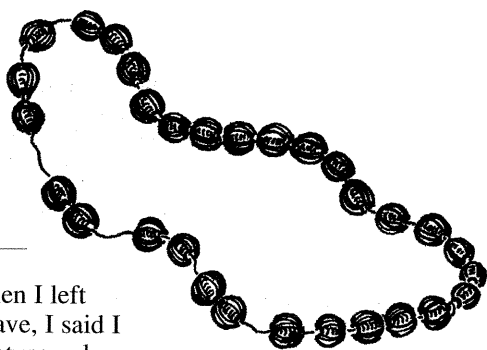
Both men and women valued the extended family and the nuclear family, as it supported the clan. Marriages were arranged. The eldest daughter married first and always with an exchange of goods. Women kept their own names but the children belonged to the male line. Alliances were made between clans through marriage. (Women experienced great anguish in the recent war. They and their children were often from warring clans.)

Marriage was a legal contract for producing children and barrenness was a cause for divorce. A marriage could end with three pronouncements of "I divorce you" in the presence of a witness. I attended my first wedding in 1959. I felt confused when I found the bride lying on her bed. Later I learned about infibulation, which removed the clitoris. Her mother-in-law had inspected her virginity and done some cutting to facilitate the wedding night. This practice is traced to the Pharaohs rather than having its origins in Islam.

There were divorced women in Somalia, but I knew no one my age who had never been married. They used the same word to describe single women at the mission and the Catholic nuns. Thus Somalis meant well when they constantly proposed marriage to me. "If God wills" was the only way to end the conversation. On a bad day it was annoying.

As a teacher, much of my work was in a man's world. I often managed men. I loved to become involved in the life cycle and religious holidays. This put me in touch with the lives of women. My home was normally open to all who came. This, more often than not, meant more men than women, which was true of the believers as well.

My life had a narrow path because of the Somali world but also because of my powerlessness in the mission. I often heard things that were difficult to relate to the mission. In 1962 a council was organized that included all the ordained men and the business manager. In 1967 this council decided, without consulting me, that I should sell the Bible in the bookstore. After I spoke with the other mission women, Somali believers and the other Protestant mission, we concluded it was unwise to sell Bibles. This decision was changed, but at a great cost to me.



By 1970 when I left for home leave, I said I would not return unless I could be part of the council. I wept a great deal—not sure I would return. While on leave I encountered Elizabeth O'Connor's books about the Church of the Savior and found them life changing. I felt called to prayer at a deep level.

Eventually I was invited back to organize the work with women in a more systematic way and I returned to Somalia. I only sat on the council one time before nationalization in 1972. But it eased my life greatly that I could speak from the inside. Everything became more open for Somali believers as well. Some of us began meeting for daily prayer. At this time, I organized the orientation for new missionaries. I always included Somalis in the orientation. Questions they raised about the mission caused us to decide to continue meeting every Friday morning. This was a milestone in our understanding of each other.

In May of 1976 the revolutionary government asked mission personnel to leave. I stayed in Nairobi and became the Somali contact person. Because of this I was able to visit Somalia in early 1978 for three weeks. I had a standing invitation to have daily lunch with the family of the man who had written the letter asking us to leave.

Somalia has changed greatly since then, as has the mission. I too have been on a spiritual journey which was shaped by my Somali Islamic experience. I would love to return sometime.

I believe a single woman has a very special place in working with Islamic people. We are far less threatening than a Western male. But it should not be done unless God calls. The Islamic world is hoping in vain to be understood by the West. Some of us, like Esther, have come into the kingdom for such a time as this.

Bertha Beachy spent 20 years in Africa teaching and managing a bookstore. Since 1980 she has been managing the Provident Bookstore in Goshen, Ind. She is a member of Assembly Mennonite Church and a Spiritual Resource Elder there.

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Five firsthand accounts of women living in Cairo. "When we listen to the women talking about their lives, we get a sense that they have brooded a great deal over their destinies. There is a philosophical breadth and eloquence to the narratives." (p. viii)

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In this detailed book, an Egyptian feminist examines a wide range of topics from female circumcision to women in Arab literature and history.

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The author investigates the lives of 15 often-forgotten female Islamic political rulers, and recounts how they achieved and exercised their power.

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This is a powerful story of three generations of Algerian women.

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A basic introduction to Islam.

Letters

I appreciated your recent *Report* which addressed the abortion issue. In her article, Ruth Stoltzfus Jost raised a point which merits more discussion, that of the relationship between miscarriages and abortions, and why pro-life activists treat them with sharp distinction. When a person dies, whether by design, illness, accident, or from a natural disaster, we grieve the genuine loss. Regardless of its cause, each human death is mourned with somber ceremony, with prayers, with a burial spot in the earth marked specifically for the deceased. If induced abortion represents the taking of human life, then the multitude of miscarriages, or spontaneous abortions, to use the medical term, are widespread natural disasters. They should be accorded all the grieving, public ceremonies, prayers and burial rites that we bestow upon the deceased. Our collective spiritual insight has never granted spontaneous abortion this status. Perhaps that fact could shed light on the nature of induced abortion.

—Mary Hershberger, Columbus, Ohio

As I read the March-April issue on “one-generation Mennonites,” I felt some kinship with the women in the stories, even though I am from a multi-generational ethnic Mennonite family. The ambivalence expressed by those who wrote of the difficulties of being fully accepted by the church that they had chosen, resonated with parts of my experience.

I would like to see an issue devoted to the ambivalence of women like me who experienced a legalistic interpretation of Christianity within our Mennonite tradition. How have other women come to terms with a Mennonite upbringing that did harm as well as good? How have they been able to separate and keep the healthy life-giving parts without leaving the Mennonite church as I have (at least for now)? I need to hear stories of other Mennonite women who have not thrown out the baby with the bath water. Thanks for publishing *Report*. I like the thematic format and the diversity of views in each issue. I'm also waiting for the day when these topics will not be considered “women's” concerns.

—Diane E. Deckert, Evanston, Ill.

Letters continued on page 14

Women in ministry

Ceci Lance was ordained January 1 as co-pastor at Fairhaven Mennonite Church, Fort Wayne, Ind.

Jane Buller was licensed for youth ministry and Christian education on November 13 at Walnut Hill Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind.

I always enjoy the *Report*, but this last one on one-generation Mennonites was especially timely for me. In January, 75 persons in my large, rural church worked through one of the courses in the LIFE process. It was my privilege to teach two of the groups. Both groups were/are genuinely willing to be open to others, but I was struck by how much the ones who grew up here value the feedback of newcomers—how it feels to be new and what it is the newcomers need. At the same time, I heard some tiredness at being once again judged to be deficient as rural ethnics. In the process of getting acquainted and making room, everyone feels both the pressure to change and the counter-claim to remain the same.

It seems to me that the process of people transferring loyalties from one group to another is longer and more complicated than we have always acknowledged. I thought each of the writers took care to be fair and I appreciated that. I'm very glad each one is in our church!

—Lois Janzen Preheim, Freeman, S.D.

When I joined the Reedley Mennonite Church in California, which was not an Old Order church like the one I was in in Illinois, after marrying my first husband, I had to be re-baptized (I wasn't immersed). At that point I felt ostracized, and from that point the Mennonite Church "turned me off," I guess. The first article in the issue on one-generation Mennonites was the first time I heard anyone verbalize that. I admire you for putting controversial articles in the *Report*.

—Marge Johnson, Liberty Lake, Wash.

News and verbs

- **"Unity and uniqueness in Christ: Celebrating global sisterhood"** is the theme of the **13th Women in Ministry Conference**, May 26–28 at Columbia Bible College, Clearbrook, B.C. Speakers will be Elizabeth Tapia of the Philippines, professor of theology at Union Theology Seminary, and Susan Classen of Ohio, former MCCer in Bolivia and El Salvador and author of *Vultures* and *Butterflies*. For information contact Miriam Ruiz, MCC B.C. Women's Concerns, Box 2038, Clearbrook, B.C. V2T 3T8; phone (604) 850-6639/857-0011.
- A conference, **"Men: In Search of a Gentler Spirit,"** was offered by Voices for Non-Violence at Fort Garry Mennonite Church in Winnipeg on April 7–8. Speakers were David Schroeder, retired professor from Canadian Mennonite Bible College, and David Rice-Lamper, who works with probation services in Winnipeg.
- **Two \$850 scholarships** for Mennonite women studying in non-Mennonite **graduate programs** are available from the Women's Missionary and Service Commission (WMSC) of the Mennonite Church. Application deadline is June 1. Request application forms from WMSC, 421 S. 2nd St., Suite 600, Elkhart, IN 46516-3243; 219-294-7131. WMSC scholarships are also available for women attending a number of Mennonite colleges and seminaries. Contact the college/seminary directly for application forms.
- Jean Janzen, poet from Fresno, Calif., has been awarded a **Creative Writing Fellowship in Poetry** from the National Endowment for the Arts.
- Ruth Krall, professor of religion and psychology at Goshen (Ind.) College, has been awarded a Lilly Endowment fellowship for the 1995–96 academic year. She will affiliate with the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Calif., as a visiting scholar to work on a self-designed project, **"Liturgy as destroyer; Liturgy as healer."** Currently divided by many oppositional forces, Christian institutions are, Krall believes, increasingly unable to meet the spiritual needs of their people. Besides experiencing firsthand the ways diverse religious traditions create ritual and liturgy, Krall plans to do some library study in liturgical studies.

Jeanette Buller was ordained for ministry at Communion Fellowship in Goshen, Ind., on November 13.

Mary Grove and **Daniel Z. Miller** were licensed for interim pastor work at East Goshen (Ind.) Mennonite Church on November 13.

Myra Robb was licensed on November 3 at Parkview Mennonite Church in Kokomo, Ind., for chaplain work.

- Carol Penner of Vineland, Ont., has been awarded the seventh annual award from the Frank H. Epp Memorial Fund. She will use the grant toward completion of her doctoral dissertation on "**Woman Abuse: Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices.**" Penner is a student at Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology.
- A group "promoting the full exercise of women's gifts" in the **Mennonite Brethren Church**, sponsored a conference-wide event on women in ministry, February 18-19 at Concord College in Winnipeg. Lydia Harder, interim director of the Toronto Medical Theological Centre in Toronto, was featured speaker.
- A travel seminar in Labrador from August 8-26 is being sponsored by the Peace and Conflict Studies program at Conrad Grebel College, and MCC Newfoundland/Labrador. It will be led by Sonia Bromley of MCC Labrador and Dean Peachey of Conrad Grebel. It will focus on social, economic, political and spiritual

conflict issues in Labrador. For information contact Peace and Conflict Studies, Conrad Grebel College, telephone 519-885-0220, ext. 265.

- Sara Wenger Shenk will become assistant dean at **Eastern Mennonite Seminary** in Harrisonburg, Va., in August.
- Sue Miller of Middlebury, Ind., is new chair of the board of directors of **Mennonite Economic Development Associates.**
- Ruth Stoltzfus Jost of Columbus, Ohio, was named coordinator of the **Mennonite Legal Association** for the next two years. In October the association held its second meeting at Laurelville (Pa.) Mennonite Church Center.
- Janice Kulp Long of Louisville, Ohio, a Church of the Brethren pastor, has begun as associate director of **Christian Peacemaker Teams.**

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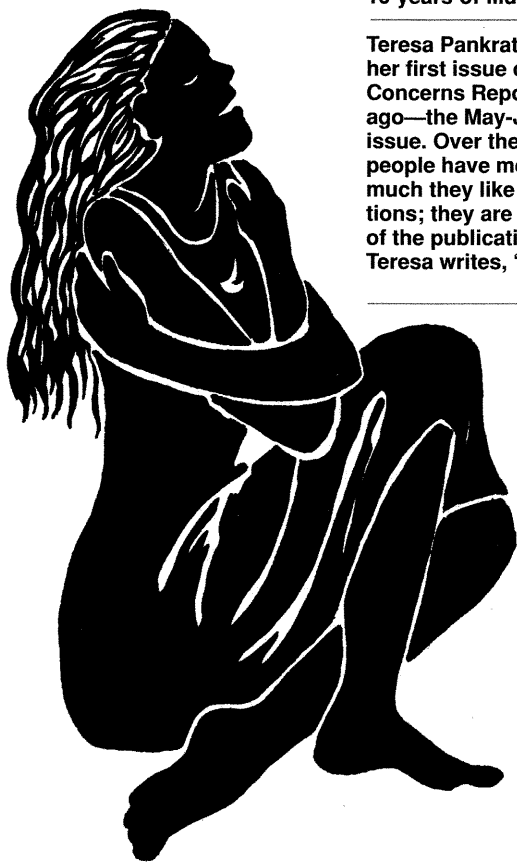
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10 years of illustrations

Teresa Pankratz illustrated her first issue of Women's Concerns Report 10 years ago—the May-June 1985 issue. Over the years many people have mentioned how much they like these illustrations; they are a favorite part of the publication for many. Teresa writes, "Illustrating the

Report for the last 10 years has given me a sense of connectedness to women and their issues all over the world. My hope has been that the drawings will in some way enrich the experience of the reader. Doing the drawings has been enriching for me as well." Many thanks, Teresa, for contributing to the Report these ten years.

Illustrations in this issue are all by Teresa Pankratz. Please do not reproduce without permission.

kaltuna

crouched in the back
of her home, in her
kitchen, over hot coals,
a baby at the breast
another barely weaned
still demanding her milk;
the men are out front,
stretched out on the mats
waiting for their meal.
cooking, cleaning, childcare
(and prayers five times daily);
these are the chores
of a tchadian arab woman.

Terry Sawatsky and his wife Cathy Hodder were country representatives for MCC in Chad for three years. Currently they are country representatives in Zaire.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

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